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ABSTRACT

Issues surrounding teaching competencies in family literacy programs were examined in a study of two well-established Even Start sites in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The program, which served 34 ethnically diverse adult learners, offered 25 hours of adult basic education, general educational development (GED), and English-for-speakers-of-other-languages instruction for parents, while their children participated in early childhood classrooms. The study investigated the reasons why the family literacy program had inconsistent results when evaluated according to the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), but showed positive gains on other standardized tests. Four teachers and eight students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of integrating teaching competencies into the GED curriculum. In addition, teachers were trained in using the CASAS competencies in their GED instruction by utilizing the CASAS curriculum. The results of CASAS pretesting and posttesting did not show measurable improvement compared with past years. Although all the students were receptive to some emphasis on competencies, and although all the teachers believed that addressing competencies is appropriate, most of the teachers found it difficult to systematically address competencies in their GED curriculum. Most teachers emphasized the difficulty of integrating CASAS competencies into GED instruction. (Contains 12 references.) (MN)

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I. ABSTRACT

This project looks at issues around integrating competencies into the curriculum of a family literacy program in Lancaster, PA. The study focuses on two well-established Even Start sites in Lancaster which served thirty-four ethnically diverse adult learners with a minimum of fifty hours of instruction in the 1998-99 school year. The program offers twenty-five hours per week of ABE, GED, and ESOL instruction for parents while their preschool children participate in early childhood classrooms. This study investigates the reasons why this family literacy program has had inconsistent results for the last several years on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) while at the same time showing positive gains on other standardized tests. To explore this issue in some depth, four teachers and eight students participated in an interview to share their perceptions of integrating competencies into the GED curriculum. In an attempt to effect a positive change on the CASAS results, teachers were trained in using the CASAS diagnostic profile and encouraged to intentionally integrate the CASAS competencies into their GED instruction by utilizing the CASAS curriculum which is specifically designed for this purpose. The results of CASAS pre and posttesting did not show measurable improvement compared to past years. From the interview data, it is clear that while students would apparently welcome some emphasis on competencies, teachers, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to systematically address competencies in their GED curriculum. Trying to effectively address the needs and goals of adult learners is at the heart of this curriculum concern.

II. PROBLEM

This study, focuses on the Even Start family literacy program in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The population of Lancaster County is 454,063. The School District of Lancaster, an urban school district which is one of the collaborators for the family literacy program along with Lancaster Head Start, has one of the highest high school drop-out rates in Pennsylvania. The Lancaster Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 (IU13), which provides publicly funded educational services --including adult literacy education-- to schools and the community in Lancaster and Lebanon counties, is the sponsoring agency and employs the adult literacy staff and faculty. IU13 offers family literacy, ABE, GED, and ESOL classes throughout the two county area and serves about 2500 students annually.

My work for IU13 includes supporting the ten teachers who work in the family literacy program, eight of whom were newly hired in the fall of 1998 to help start new classes. In addition, I am responsible to train teachers in the appropriate use of the assessment tools we are required to use for reporting to state and federal funders. Beyond this, I am available to assist teachers when they have questions about teaching methods and materials. Five of the nine teachers are teaching at sites in Lancaster and the other four are located in Lebanon which is about thirty miles northwest of Lancaster. The nine female and one male instructors in family literacy teach part time. Their schedules vary from three to twenty hours of teaching per week. One teacher works full time by combining teaching with other training and administrative duties. In Lancaster, there are four sites providing family literacy services and in Lebanon, there are two. We also provide home-based instruction when necessary.

For this project I decided to focus primarily on the two firmly established family literacy sites in Lancaster. Even Start is in its seventh year of service to the community. During the 1998-99 school year, I have been an integral part of the two family literacy classes, which became the focus of this study, since for parts of the school year I team taught at both sites. Therefore, I am well acquainted with the teachers as well as most of the students who participated this year.

For seven years, our Even Start family literacy program has been using the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) as one of the assessment instruments for reporting purposes; however, we have typically shown inconsistent gains on this test. In the past seven years, our program achieved the state standard, which stipulates a three point average gain between pre and post testing, only twice. In other words, there were five years for which we did not meet the standard. This year we have expanded our family literacy program in Lancaster and added sites in Lebanon. We have continued to use the CASAS in our program and have trained new teachers on its use at our new sites. The focus of my project is 1) why we have seen inconsistent results on CASAS, and 2) what might lead to more significant gains.

Since obtaining the GED is the most important motivation articulated by students who come to our family literacy program, I am interested in how to balance this goal with other more contextualized learning goals, i.e. life skills competencies. Of course, all adult literacy programs in the state are expected to meet certain standards in order to demonstrate their effectiveness; thus, finding the best way to capture learning gains is also at issue for our program. One of my goals at

the outset of this project was to try to understand the reasons why we were not meeting the standard for CASAS. Upon looking more deeply into our assessment practices, it became clear that we were exceeding the state standard when using other standardized assessments acceptable to the state. In other words, in addition to the CASAS, our family literacy teachers were also using the Test of Adult Basic Skills (TABE), the Basic English Skills Test (BEST), as well as GED practice tests and the actual GED test, and students consistently showed acceptable gains on all of these assessments. So for instance, it was not unusual for a student to score a one point gain or even a negative gain on CASAS while at the same time showing a two or three grade level increase in math or reading on the TABE. In addition, students who were showing minimal or negative gains on the CASAS were often passing the GED.

I began to wonder what might be the reasons for this seeming incongruity. Were teachers targeting the CASAS competencies in their instruction? Included in the CASAS materials is an elegant diagnostic system for designing an individual student profile as well as a class profile which show, based on the test results, which competencies on which focus to instruction. In addition to these profiles, there is a CASAS curriculum which outlines many lessons integrating the CASAS competencies into the GED curriculum. Every teacher has access to this curriculum and has been encouraged to use it. If, in fact, teachers were not using the CASAS diagnostic information and the curriculum, I became curious to understand why. I began to wonder how hard or easy it was for instructors to try to target these competencies in an ABE/GED class. I began to question how our teachers felt about the relevance of focusing on CASAS competencies. Moreover, I was equally interested in how the students felt about targeting competencies.

Would students who were focused on getting their GED welcome this kind of instruction or would they resist? Do students consider these skills to be personally relevant? How do students feel about their skills in these areas? I began to wonder about the appropriateness of focusing on competencies with our ABE/GED learners. Given some of the controversies over a competency-based approach outlined by Collins (1983) and Auerbach (1986, 1989), I began to be dubious about the mandate to address competencies with our learners. Might we be better off maintaining focus on the students' academically-oriented goals. Might we be better off using other assessment instruments available for reporting purposes? Were we missing an opportunity to address competencies or not?

At the outset of this project, I assumed that the reason for our inconsistent CASAS results was that teachers were not targeting the CASAS competencies in their instruction. This assumption was based, in part, on the realization that instructors were also using the TABE, the GED, and the BEST and typically showing consistent gains on all of these. My goal for the project was to discover whether, in fact, my assumption that teachers were not targeting competencies in their instruction were true, and if true, to try to understand the reasons why teachers were not focusing on competencies. In addition, I wanted to know whether an intentional focus on the CASAS competencies in the curriculum of our family literacy program would yield more favorable results, i.e. achieving an average three point gain between pre and posttesting. In other words, it was my goal to encourage instructors to intentionally address CASAS competencies in their classes with the hope that learners would show increased gains on CASAS. In addition, it was very important to me to invite teachers and students to dialogue with me about the issue of focusing on competencies in their classes.

It is my responsibility to support instruction in our family literacy program. Additionally, in my role as the assessment trainer for the Southeast Region, I am well aware of the need to demonstrate accountability to funders through gains on standardized assessment instruments. Also at issue is the notion that a competency-based curriculum has the potential to address the needs of learners. Moreover, it is common sense that assessment -- particularly when using a competency-based assessment tool -- be linked to instruction.

At a minimum, I believed that this project would invite staff in our program into a conversation about using a competency-based assessment tool to help us to grow in understanding the issues. In addition, I hoped that if teachers utilized the tools at their disposal, i.e. the diagnostic profiles and the CASAS curriculum, that we would improve our standardized testing results.

III. PLANNING

I began my project by collecting CASAS data from previous years in order to establish a baseline. The data confirmed that our CASAS results did not consistently meet the standard. We had met the standard of a three point average gain only twice in the past seven years. In the fall of 1998,I talked with each of the family literacy teachers about targeting competencies for instruction and made sure that each of them understood how to use the CASAS tests, the diagnostic tools, and

the CASAS curriculum. I planned to collect pre and posttesting data, for students with at least fifty hours of instruction, in the spring of 1999 with the hope of seeing better gains.

At the outset, I was aware of the constraint of time. I hoped that teachers would have enough time to incorporate competency-based instruction into their curriculum in order to impact test results. Another factor which I expected to have an effect on this project was the general academic approach to instruction, based on student-stated goals, to get their GED. Because it takes some creative lesson planning -- even with the availability of the CASAS curriculum -- for instructors to integrate GED instruction with lessons on competencies, I expected there might be some resistance from instructors and from learners alike.

In what follows, I will first consider some of the literature related to teaching life skills competencies in adult literacy. I will then describe the two family literacy sites which were the target of this study, including sketches of the students and staff who participated. The results of the study are reported in two sections. First I provide an analysis of the interview data and second I describe the CASAS pre and posttesting results from this school year. From the data, I try to determine the efficacy of incorporating life-skills competencies into a culturally diverse family literacy program. What follows are students' and teachers' thoughts and feelings about targeting life skills competencies within their classes. In the last section, I reflect on the results of the qualitative and the quantitative findings and make recommendations for future action and related research.

Current Literature on Competency-Based Adult Literacy Instruction

Given the great diversity among adult literacy learners, it is not surprising that there are a variety of approaches used to teach adult literacy. Various philosophies undergird these different approaches. Fingeret (1992) outlines four: literacy as skills; literacy as tasks; literacy as social and cultural practices; and literacy as critical reflection and action. Those who understand literacy as skills, emphasize coding and encoding of text without regard to context. It is assumed that literacy is a set of discrete skills, which when mastered sequentially, automatically lead to proficient usage. The view of literacy as tasks contextualizes literacy around things people need to be able to do in life, such as read a bus schedule, fill out a job application, etc. It is assumed that successfully performing a task in the classroom will transfer over to real life. In other words, there is often no

recognition that the situation can affect the nature of the task. However, those who perceive literacy as social and cultural practices recognize this difference. Respect for the import of cultural differences and social context is at the core of this view of literacy. As Fingeret notes, "we engage in literacy in a social setting, and we cannot separate the setting from our literacy behavior" (p. 6). Paulo Freire has influenced literacy education around the world, and his ideas are foundational in the US among those who understand literacy as critical reflection and action. These practitioners see literacy as the means to challenge notions of knowledge and the distribution of power in our community and in our society.

Of the four approaches outlined, my focus here is literacy as tasks. Tasks in literacy education are commonly referred to as competencies. Defined by the US Office of Education in 1978, competency-based education is "a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic and life skills necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society" (Savage, 1991). Auerbach (1986) explains that this definition of competency-based adult education grew out of Northrup's (1977) *The Adult Performance Level Study* (APL) in which he examined the kinds of tasks most often performed by American adults. He then organized categories of behaviors needed to successfully perform these functions and tasks. The result was a compilation of sixty-five competencies and numerous added sub objectives, all categorized under five knowledge areas and four basic skills areas (p. 414). The five knowledge areas determined to be necessary to function in modern society include occupational, consumer, health, government and law, and community resources. The four skills needed include reading and writing, listening and speaking, problem solving and computation, and interpersonal relations (Savage, 1992). Auerbach (1986), in a critique of competency-based education with adult learners studying English as a second language (ESL), provides a helpful framework for her analysis of competency-based. I have extracted from Auerbach those points which I believe are also relevant to an ABE (Adult Basic Education) and GED population of adult learners.

According to Auerbach, competency-based education: 1) focuses on successful functioning in society; 2) focuses on life skills; 3) is performance- or task-based; 4) is negotiated between teacher and student with agreed upon outcomes made explicit; 5) involves continuous assessment of progress, i.e. pre and posttesting; and 6) is learner-centered and individualized. In addition, by design, a competency-based approach shows mastery of the learning objectives when a student

demonstrates the ability to actually accomplish the task or function, rather than by taking a paper and pencil test. So, ideally the adult literacy teacher would create opportunities for the student to demonstrate mastery of a function or a task as part of instruction. However, two caveats should be noted. First, in order to comply with accountability to funders, students must be able to demonstrate successful performance on the paper and pencil CASAS test which attempts to emulate these life skills competencies. Second, as noted by some (Fingeret, 1992; Auerbach, 1986), when teachers draw these tasks from published materials, they can differ in significant ways from the authentic ones. I don't believe it necessarily follows that abstracted examples such as those from published materials or those recreated on a test prove anything about an adult's ability to perform in an authentic situation; the social and cultural setting will have an inherent effect. It is also quite possible that adults may be able to perform competencies outside the classroom fine, but have difficulty with the abstracted versions developed for teaching and testing.

Collins (1983) argues that a competency-based system draws its authority from a "false aura of exactness",by claiming to be able to reduce all skills to measurable outcomes, when in fact doing so is problematic (p. 175). Moreover, utilizing a competency-based approach which is not negotiated with adult learners and which ignores the social context can be, according to Collins,

> a purposeful attempt to define the teacher-learning situation according to a deterministic doctrine which does not adequately account for the motivational aspects of purposeful action (p. 178).

Thus, a competency-based curriculum is what Greene (1971) calls *curriculum as fact*, rather than *curriculum as practice* (cited in Auerbach, 1986). A competency-based model often reflects Freire's (1970) idea of the banking model of education. Auerbach (1986) first describes curriculum as fact.

> [T]here is a structure of socially prescribed knowledge to be mastered by students. Here the function of education is to socialize learners according to the values of the dominant socioeconomic group. The teacher's job is to devise more and more effective ways to transmit skills.... In curriculum as practice, the focus shifts from how students can absorb and replicate knowledge to how they can synthesize and generate knowledge... Knowledge becomes what is accomplished in the collaborative work between students and teachers (pp. 416-7).

It seems clear that education with adults is most effective when tied directly to real needs identified by adult learners. Shirley Edwards, Coordinator of Teamster Local 137's Workplace Literacy Program, reflects on what this means for adult learners and their teachers.

> Student-centeredness implies that in a classroom power is shared, based on common understanding that students, as well as the teacher, bring with them goals and objectives for learning, as well as prior knowledge and experience essential to learning new things. Goals and objectives are then negotiated in the classroom; prior knowledge is invited and validated. Topics to be covered, tasks to be accomplished, and methodology to be used emerge from these negotiations. (Consortium for Worker Education and Institute for Literacy Studies, 1987, p. 7 cited in Collins et. al, 1989)

As ideal as this may sound, there are often tensions between such a learner-centered approach and accountability to funders.

Was it possible, as a family literacy program, to use the results of the CASAS to assist the learners in our classes to articulate their needs and goals? Or were the CASAS competencies unrelated to student goals? I wondered if students might be interested in expanding their learning opportunities outside of the realm of the academic GED textbooks to include certain competencies. These questions became an integral focus of my study. From the outset of this project, I had determined at least two criteria for success. My first goal was that, as a result of successfully targeting competencies for instruction, students would show enough gains on the CASAS to meet the state standard. The second less tangible result would be that our program staff would grow in understanding the issues around using a competency-based assessment instrument.

Problem Statement of measurable outcome: Will integrating instruction on competencies identified as needed by the life skills CASAS pretest of learners in family literacy program improve post test results for individual learners and for the program overall to the level of the PDE program performance standard over three month period?

IV. ACTION

The Two Family Literacy Sites

Washington Elementary is situated in a predominantly Hispanic residential neighborhood. The

class has twenty-five students on the roles. There is one Vietnamese male, one white male, one Puerto Rican male, one African American female, and all the rest are Puerto Rican females. Among the Puerto Rican group about half are bilingual since they have lived in the US for a number of years; most of them attended school in both Puerto Rico and the US. The other Puerto Rican students enrolled in the program in order to learn English. This class is made up of about half ESL students and half ABE/GED students. Among both groups are students with very low literacy in both English and Spanish. Most of the students who speak English tested below the fifth grade level in reading and math. Most of the ESOL group had little or no ability in English, with the exception of a couple of students.

As of the beginning of April, sixteen of the twenty-five students had accumulated fifty or more hours for the year, all of them female. Nine of that number had accumulated over 100 hours, and five had accumulated over 200 hours. The average attendance is around seven or eight students per day for the morning class, and for the afternoon class the average is three students. There is a commitment with the public assistance office to provide class for students who must meet welfare requirements. However, the afternoon schedule is available to all the students. The majority of the time there is only one teacher who must address the needs of a very diverse group of learners; however, two mornings per week there is a volunteer tutor to assist the teacher.

The Head Start Family Advocacy Center is located in the center of Lancaster in a mixed residential and industrial area. There are twenty-eight students on the role for the year. The average attendance per day is seven or eight students. As of the beginning of April, eighteen students had accumulated over fifty hours of instruction for the year. Eleven had accumulated over 100 hours, and three of that number had accumulated over 200 hours. There is only one male student on the list, and he had only nine hours for the year. Among the twenty-seven women, five are African American, one is Filipino, five are White, and sixteen are Hispanic. All the students in this class are studying for their GED in English except for one student who has been studying for the GED in Spanish. There are no ESOL students in this group. At registration these students tested at wide ranges from third grade to ninth and tenth grade. Most were in the ABE range between fifth and eighth grade. This year seven students in this class have passed all five sections of the GED test. Several others have passed parts of the test.

The GED instruction in our family literacy program is methodical and individualized and is

focused mainly on the GED textbooks. However, the students sometimes work with a partner or in a small group to help each other, too. There is a often a hum of chatter as students who choose to work together talk about the GED textbook exercises as well as share personal conversation. Some of the students have formed important friendships with one another and have developed a vital and supportive learning community. The teachers sometimes organize lessons around job skills, current events, or literature. They also sometimes read and discuss articles from *Parent and Child* magazine. Both family literacy classes take seven or eight field trips each year including trips to the library, to a farm, and to the computer lab for training. Some of these trips are with parents and children together. The Parent and Child Together time (PACT) is planned as part of the class every two weeks and often includes parent education. During PAST time, parents join their children in the early childhood classroom to sing, read stories, and do art projects.

The Instructors and the Adult Learners

For this project, I interviewed four family literacy teachers and eight students. I have used fictitious names for all participants. The interviews were from approximately forty to ninety minutes in length. The study focuses on ABE/GED students. None of the eight students I interviewed is studying English as a second language, though several are bilingual. Among the eight students one is African American, one is Filipino, one is White and five are Latina, all from Puerto Rico. Most are in their early to mid twenties, but a couple are in their thirties. All are parents since in order to participate in Even Start, students must have a child seven years old or younger.

Terry teaches at the Head Start Family Advocacy Center site. Terry has ten years of experience in preparing students for the GED. She has a strong track record of success in assisting students to achieve this goal. She has been teaching with Even Start for several years, and is our main teacher trainer. The family literacy class at the Head Start Center is seen as a model. New teachers observe Terry's class and receive a significant part of their orientation and training from her. Terry teaches Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 11:30 AM, and Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday from 12:00 AM to 2:00 PM. Pat is in her second year at Washington Elementary, and she is currently teaching Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 12:30 PM. Shelly was hired this fall to teach the afternoon schedule at Washington on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 11:30 AM to 3:30 PM. Ben is a new teacher who has helped us to start up a new family

literacy class in Lancaster at the Carter and McRae Elementary School. He teaches Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings.

Four of the students I interviewed attend classes at the the Head Start site and four students attend classes at the Washington site. From the Head Start site I interviewed Beth, Denise, Linda and Maria, all of whom have either almost or more than 200 hours of instruction for the year. Maria passed her GED test in March. The others have passed portions of their test. Denise and Maria have been in the program for two years, and Linda has been studying with Terry for four years. From the Washington site, I interviewed Donna, Evelyn, Jan and Val. Jan is a fairly new student who started attending classes in March. Donna, Evelyn and Val have accumulated over 100 hours of instruction this year. Donna and Evelyn have passed some of their sub tests for the GED. Val did not earn a passing score on the test she took in March which was her first attempt.

V. RESULTS

The Interview Data: Teachers' Perceptions of the CASAS Competencies

I asked the family literacy instructors to talk about their impressions of the CASAS and their experience in using it. All the teachers expressed the view that addressing competencies in a family literacy class is appropriate, though Pat admitted that initially she thought it might be insulting to the students. The most experienced teacher in the group, Terry, responded without hesitation that CASAS does not measure learning gains and that it does not help her determine a student's beginning reading level. Reiterating her need to know a student's reading level, Terry stated, "I can tell you that the 240s is a good CASAS score, but I still don't know where to start someone in reading. I can be sure with the TABE." Terry noted that the grade level equivalency chart provided by CASAS has not been helpful. She commented that the levels seem to her to be too high.

Since the teachers are so focused on the students' goals to get the GED, they use primarily GED preparation textbooks which are available at two levels: the GED level for those reading at the ninth grade level or higher and the Pre-GED level for those reading between a fifth and a ninth grade level. For adult learners below the fifth grade reading level teachers have other texts available, most of which are skills-based. It is critical to Terry to start the students in the right textbook. The other three teachers did not mention this concern, but Ben expressed some of the

same concerns about CASAS not showing gains. Ben asked, "Why is this the only instrument we use in our program if the GED is part of the goal. It's not so useful if the GED is the goal." Ben's comment implies that for some students, i.e. those who have mastered the competencies, a competency-based approach is inappropriate. Ben had a student this year who scored very high on her CASAS pretest making it difficult to show measurable gains on the posttest. Ironically, this student actually showed a ten point loss on her posttest. Ben talked about how the student was probably motivated to prove to herself what she could do when she first entered the program. However, when she took the posttest she had less to prove since she had already passed three sub tests for the GED; therefore, she may have been less motivated to perform well on CASAS. Terry also mentioned this low motivation factor for students at the end of the year, especially for those who have passed the GED.

All four teachers agreed that addressing competencies in their classes is needed. The problem for Terry is finding the time to locate or create competency-based lessons. Ben also mentioned that not having a set curriculum makes it harder, even though he has found some useful teaching ideas in the CASAS curriculum. Terry also indicated that some students might resist if too much emphasis were placed on competencies instead of the GED. Stating her desire to change her thinking on this, Terry said she recognizes the need to focus on competencies, but at the same time she is unsure of how students would feel about this kind of instruction. She noted that the students in her class have the option to participate in the CPR class and in the nutrition class during the year, both of which address some of the competencies outlined in CASAS. In the nutrition class, for instance, students learn how to read food labels. Terry stated that she would be more comfortable teaching mini lessons on competencies which were complete unto themselves rather than trying to tie competencies into GED instruction. For Ben integrating competencies into the curriculum would not be difficult if there were not so many other challenges in the classroom, the main one being the diversity of learners in the same class, i.e. people at diverse learning levels and ESOL and ABE/GED in the same class. Ben stated that it is far easier to individualize instruction for the GED students by having them work independently in the GED textbooks. At a family literacy conference last fall, Ben heard one of the trainers talk about getting the students "out of the textbooks." While Ben recognizes the benefits of getting the students out of their workbooks, he questioned, "How do you get everyone out of the book when there are so many walls. The more diverse, the harder it

is." Ben noted that most teachers assume that the only way to deal with such diversity is to individualize.

For Shelly and Pat, integrating competencies seemed to be somewhat natural. They are using the competency profile charts for individual students and for the class, and they are both aware of which competencies to focus on, particularly in planning instruction for the ESOL group. Focusing on competencies with the GED students seems to be more through happenstance than by design. As Shelly put it, competencies often come up in conversation with students in class, such as when students want to study for their driver's license or request help in filling out forms or in understanding correspondence from the school. Shelly mentioned one student who is highly motivated to understand the frequent correspondence she receives from the school regarding her child who is enrolled in special education. Another way Pat and Shelly have been intentional about addressing competencies is by using the newspaper in class. Shelly commented on the students interest in the newspaper.

> For some of them they're interested in... some of them have started buying newspapers. They're interested in the news. If we bring 'em in, they pull them open immediately. And I think that's because we are reading in class; we talk with them about current events. And they're very interested in that. It's a different world. They're not used to even looking at the world outside of Lancaster, not even just Lancaster, but their little section of Lancaster.

In addition, it seems that both Pat and Shelly, look for opportunities to integrate the life skills competencies into the GED curriculum. Since they are aware that many students have trouble understanding charts, maps, tables, and graphs as well as diagrams, advertisements and food labels, these instructors seek to focus particular attention to these if and when they come up in the GED textbook. The Science and Social Studies texts often ask students to extract data which is organized in these ways. Shelly mentioned working with a learner on reading an analog clock, and they both talked about personalizing the GED materials in ways that address competencies. Pat described an excerpt from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the Literature and Arts text which students typically have trouble with because it is written in dialect. Pat uses the text as a springboard to discuss how language works. She explains to the student that while everyone uses slang, we all need to learn when and how to use our language appropriately. From there she

leads the student into a discussion of using language effectively when interviewing for a job, which is one of the CASAS competencies.

Pat described another lesson which focused on reading a map. She acknowledged that an abstract map in a textbook is of limited value in teaching. Instead she personalizes the lesson by having the students look at a map of Lancaster. First they try to find the school on the map. After studying the directions and the symbols, they took the map with them on their trip to the library. This gave the learners the opportunity to see that giving directions for driving, because of the one-way streets, would have to be different than for walking. Both reading a map and giving and following directions (particularly relevant for ESOL) are CASAS competencies.

When asked if a competency-based curriculum would in any way limit the learners we serve, Shelly was quick to state that she believes that just the opposite is true. In other words, not assisting learners with certain competencies could limit their potential to succeed. She illustrated this point by telling a story about a student who did not realize that meat requires refrigeration. Pat also insisted that competencies are appropriate for all learners at all levels. She laughed when I suggested that some people might feel that competency-based instruction is more appropriate for lower level learners and remarked, "Well, I know graduate students who don't know how to load a camera!"

The Interview Data: The Learners' Perceptions of the CASAS Competencies

The students and I together looked over Level C Form 35, which is the third highest level test in the life skills CASAS series, and read the list of competencies being assessed. The competencies targeted on this particular test include interpreting housing ads, reading a map, identifying regulations and procedures to get a driver's license, interpreting job applications, interpreting information found in newspapers, periodicals, business letters, pamphlets, and publications, and fourteen more. I asked the students for their impressions of the test and whether or not they thought these things were important for people to be able to do. All the students acknowledged that the test covered ordinary, everyday activities. All agreed that most or all of the competencies on the list were important for people to be able to do.

We talked about how most of the CASAS test questions, even though they require reading and answering multiple-choice questions, are quite different from those on the GED test. Some

things might be similar to the GED, but much of it is different. I told the students that I was interested to know whether they thought the teacher should focus on these things in the class if the CASAS test result suggested that people in the class didn't know some of these things. I asked them how they would feel about it if their teacher took time in class to address some of these competencies, especially since they don't have much to do with the GED.

I was somewhat surprised that seven out of the eight students I interviewed thought it would be good for their teacher to focus on some of these competencies in class. I expected the students to say either that they already knew these things or that they could learn these things on their own, if and when they needed to learn them. I thought the students would say that they would prefer to stay focused on their GED studies in class. There was only one student who said she would study competencies only if they were related to the GED. Revealing her sense that she and her classmates have a right to some ownership in curriculum decisions, this same learner suggested that students should feel free to talk to the teacher about any lesson they don't consider to be relevant. She would say to the teacher, "Some of the lessons that you're giving comes out of the [GED] test, but why we gotta study what you're teaching if we're not gonna get it on the [GED] test, and it's not very important to study that?"

Here are some of the other students' responses:

> They should appear in the stuff in school. These are stuff that you use like most of the time, you know, in your life. There's a lot of people going for the license, you know, and they should know the regulations and stuff.... Like I don't know how to read a map. When I travel, not that I travel, but in an emergency when I travel, I don't know how to use a map. (Val)

> I would think that regardless of whether it appear on the GED test at least you would have the knowledge of knowing when you go in the grocery store of how to read a label and what you can get out of it. Like does it have fat in it or whatever? 'Cause that's what you learn on the labels. Or how much calcium is in it? (Linda)

> It's probably best that you don't just focus on one thing like I'm doing now [with math]. I would like to know what's going on. Like this kind of thing on the chart. Because I

don't know especially this map reading and travel needs. One time me and my husband went somewhere and he gave me the map, and [laughs] we got lost and he got so mad at me because I ... [laughs] I think this is a good example, you know, not just the GED thing. It's not just the GED thing you are trying to get. (Denise)

I was just gonna say if they are gonna use this test to see what skills we have, don't just do that. Okay. Don't just say here's the test. Go take it. I need to see what level you're on. Teach us the stuff that we're not on level with.... What your focus is when you try to get your GED is to... improving skills and gaining more knowledge and this is all stuff that is gaining more knowledge and improving skills. [reading from the list of competencies] Comparing price and quality to determine the best buys for goods and services... this one I can really see.... Recognizes problems related to drugs, tobacco, and alcohol and identify where treatment may be obtained. (Maria)

I think it's important [to include competencies in the class]. Because I get tired of them, taking test after test after test. (Donna)

I think probably both is good to, you know, focus on this, but then the ones, you know, like us trying to study for the GED it will take time out. I think it's a good idea to focus on this. I think I'd put my spare time into the class to do it. (Jan)

I like to learn a lot. I like to... personally I like to study all these different kinds of stuff. If I could learn more about other stuff, I would, you know. For me, I think it's good. (Evelyn)

What to make of these comments? Many adult education practitioners conduct a needs assessment with new students as part of their orientation. This often includes a list of topics or competencies to focus on for instruction. It is common for adult learners to say that they are interested in learning many or most of the items on the list. The students in this study may have been responding similarly. Even though I tried to make it clear that I wanted their honest impressions and opinions about these competencies, I have wondered if the students may have

been responding to me as an authority figure who was offering a suggestion to them. Perhaps they wanted to give me the response they thought I was expecting. In addition, since it is a common assumption that a test administered in school must measure things of substance, it would be natural for the students to think that the list of competencies represents things that people should know. They may have responded out of this assumption, not wanting to appear uninterested in things so-called literate people know and do every day. I found it interesting that Maria questioned the rationale for having to take the CASAS test if the test in no way informs instruction; as this student implies, doing so is nothing more than busy work.

On the other hand, I would like to believe that these students have a sense of what information would be helpful to them and that they responded candidly. I'd like to believe that they are strong enough people not to be influenced to say that they would like to learn how to read maps if they really have no interest whatsoever in doing so. There is a clear theme running through several of the responses that suggests that these learners have an interest in and a desire to learn many things, besides the GED. Furthermore, it seems that balancing GED study with other kinds of lessons would, for some of these learners, help alleviate the tediousness of completing GED workbook exercises and practice tests.

The CASAS Testing Data for 1998-99

The CASAS pre and posttesting data I have collected to date for this year indicates that we did not meet the three point average gain set by the state. For several years, there has been a steady decline in the number of matched pre and post test pairs for CASAS since teachers have preferred using other testing instruments which show gains more reliably. In the 1995-96 school year, there were sixteen pairs with an average gain of 1.37; in the 1996-97 school year, there were only nine matching pairs with an average gain of 1.22; and in the 1997-98 school year there were only four pre and post tests for CASAS with an average gain of 2.0. This year, I have collected from the two sites involved in the study nine matching pairs to date with a gain of only 1.33. Once again, there are students among this group who have shown significant gains on the TABE and have passed subtests of the GED.

The interview data shows that issues remain for our teachers. It is difficult for some teachers to integrate competencies into GED instruction. At least one teacher prefers to teach

competencies as completely separate lessons. Even for teachers who find integrating competencies to be rather natural, there is no systematic approach to addressing the competencies for the ABE/GED students. Addressing competencies through happenstance does not seem to yield a positive result on the CASAS. Even so, I cannot conclude that addressing competencies in a disciplined manner would yield positive test results since the teachers involved in the study did not do so. I believe that teachers may have benefited from more discussion and a clearly articulated plan for how to address competencies in the classroom. The CASAS diagnostic profile and curriculum, though useful, did not offer enough guidance and specific teaching strategies for use in these teachers' multi-level classrooms. Beyond this, is the uncertainty felt by some teachers about the appropriateness of addressing competencies with certain learners. I infer from both the interview data and the CASAS test results that incorporating competencies may be appropriate for some learners but not for all. There are students every year who gain a very high score on the CASAS pretest. For this group of students, focusing on competencies would seem inappropriate. Notwithstanding, I believe there are larger questions which need to be pursued by our staff regarding the question of addressing both our accountability requirements as a program and the instructional needs of our students. At the heart of the issue is curriculum design.

VI. REFLECTION

I am keenly aware of the implications of limiting the choices of learners through a competency-based curriculum. As Payne (1988) points out, the socio-cultural hierarchy is maintained by the different options made available to people.

> Working-class people have their decisions shaped by material reality. If education really did offer us all the same chances, how would the social relations of exploiter and exploited be reproduced? Attitudes to education are part of a whole structure of relationships to society, which have their roots in real material divisions (13).

A competency-based curriculum is not offered to everyone. What kinds of learners are provided an educational curriculum such as this? Certainly not those preparing for higher education where the emphasis is on developing cognitive skills rather than on behavior and performance. Much of the content of competencies for the workplace emphasizes preparing people for the lowest level jobs. However there is an irony, as noted by Auerbach (1986), because to be effective in the workplace

requires the ability to think critically. According to Klemp (1979), three skills are most important at work for all but the lowest skilled job: "the ability to organize diverse information, the ability to see many sides of a complex issue, and the ability to learn from and apply experience in a new situation" (cited in Auerbach, 1986, p. 419). How does an emphasis on competencies prepare individuals for a job which requires these skills? Moreover, by taking time to focus on competencies, how much time remains to teach the skills adult learners need to understand and learn the cultural codes of power (e.g. standard English) needed to succeed in this society (Delpit, 1988).

Regarding the use of CASAS competencies in the Lancaster Even Start family literacy program, I would like to leave aside the point that the list of CASAS competencies is not generated by the adult learners in our class nor do the competencies necessarily reflect the interests or goals of our learners. A competency-based approach actually presupposes that instruction is based on the needs of the learners. Then, upon consideration of the results of the paper and pencil test, teachers and learners decide together which competencies to target for instruction. It is important to recognize that the individualized nature of the CASAS system may undermine the sustenance of a learning community and may also be culturally contrary to what learners are accustomed to if approached as individual learning goals. Even so, I can imagine a curriculum in family literacy which is -- at least in part -- co-constructed with the teacher and the learners together leading to a suitable emphasis on certain competencies.

With our family literacy group, for instance, it might be worthwhile to have a conversation with the students about their interest in studying maps. If the students were so inclined, the teacher could invite the adult learners to help design the lesson by drawing maps of their neighborhoods or bringing maps to class that they would like to learn about. Students who already know how to read maps might be interested in helping to teach the lesson, perhaps through accessing information on the internet. Mapquest, for instance, is an interesting website where visitors can access street maps and get directions from cities all around the world. During the unit, it would also be important to point out what kind of map reading is needed for the GED.

Such a participatory curriculum design (see Auerbach, 1990; Morgan, 1998; and Wrigley & Guth, 1992) requires much flexibility on the part of the teacher, and it won't guarantee gains on the competency-based assessment. However, if students and teachers agree that an emphasis on

competencies is worthwhile, and they negotiate together on which competencies are interesting and relevant, we can work at maintaining a learner-centered focus in instruction, address accountability issues, and find ways to effectively demonstrate learning gains. Being account able, first, to the adult learners in their classrooms is at the heart of our goal.

A fruitful course for our family literacy staff would be to form a teacher research group to consider this issue in depth. It would be worthwhile to discuss the results of this study and to talk together about what it means to address competencies in our learner-centered family literacy program and what it means to contextualize learning, particularly with adult learners studying for the GED. If we decide that it is important to address life skills competencies in our classrooms, having the opportunity to consider some effective means for intentionally and systematically doing so will be critical. Working together, may result in our designing and implementing an intervention for another round of action research. Further research could also lead to our discovering innovative ways to effectively capture multiple dimensions of learning.

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